

II*

The conquest of Greece

A few days after the Congress came to an end, Sloane, E. Callot and myself joined Mr. Bikelas for a meeting in the small apartment he kept in the Rue de Babylone, in Paris. It was there that the edifice of the IOC was consolidated.

Bikelas was reluctant to accept the presidency. I favoured the idea of a mobile presidency belonging by right to the nationality of the next Olympiad. Everything that might help to strengthen the international character of the cycle that was about to start seemed to me of paramount importance. Bikelas would only have to occupy the post until the end of the year 1896 and I would then take over for the next four-year period. Meanwhile I would occupy the post of "Secretary General", a position of greater interest than most presidencies, for a Secretary General is the kingpin of an active administration.

This was the way I had acted with the USFSA in order to transform it and make it a cornerstone of the "muscular" revival in France. I appointed Ernest Callot as Treasurer, one of the elders, who combined a love of Letters with a love of Sport and shared our ambitions and hopes; then I explained my plan, which was to complete without undue haste, but without any delay either, the façade of the IOC and to endow its members with the armour of complete independence by refusing admittance to any "representative" of anybody or anything as well as any "subsidy" from any source whatsoever. "The poor man's armour" murmured Bikelas. But they all understood perfectly the need to act in this way if we wished to ensure the future of an institution bearing an illustrious name, but lacking practical foundations and still largely misunderstood by the general public. In the audience of two thousand who heard the *Hymn to Apollo*, there were more artists than sportsmen and the end of the Congress fizzled out in the general excitement caused by the assassination of President Carnot.

We also reached agreement concerning the principle of the equality of sports. Already during the Congress, at the meetings on 19th and 22nd June, I had had to intervene in order to prevent the so-called "minor sports" from being treated simply as appendages of "athletics", as was to re-occur so often subsequently and for a long time to come.

Some idea of these important decisions is given in No.2 of the quarterly bulletin I immediately began to publish. The following passages are taken from its pages: "We have been asked to clarify the nature of our undertaking. Here, in a few lines, is our reply... Our intention, in reviving an institution that has lain forgotten for so many centuries, is as follows: Athletics are assuming growing importance every year. The part they play appears to be as important and as lasting in the modern world as it was in antiquity; they reappear moreover with new characteristics; they are international and democratic, suited therefore to the ideas and needs of the present day. But today, as in times gone by, their effect will be bene-

* See "Olympic Review" since No. 101-102.

ficial or harmful depending on the use made of them and the direction they are made to take. Athletics can bring into play both the noblest and the basest passions; they can develop the qualities of unselfishness and honour just as much as the love of gain; they can be chivalrous or corrupt, virile or bestial; finally, they can be used to strengthen peace or to prepare for war. Now, nobility of sentiments, high regard for the virtues of unselfishness and honour, a spirit of chivalry, virile energy and peace are the prime needs of modern democracies, whether republican or monarchic..."

About the middle of the summer, the IOC was finally constituted by the acceptances of those who had been appointed without my having been able to sound them out beforehand. On 4th September, Mr. Cuff's acceptance arrived from Christchurch and on the 15th, the Duke of Andria's from Naples. Twelve nationalities were thus represented at the start, and one of the tasks of the Committee was to complete its numbers. It was a "self-recruiting body", like the organising body of the Henley Regattas. But it had already become what it was to remain for the next thirty years, and what it still is today—a committee composed of three concentric circles: a small *nucleus* of dedicated active members; a "nursery" of willing members capable of being educated along the right lines; and finally, a *façade* of people of varying degrees of usefulness, whose presence would serve to satisfy national pretensions while lending prestige to the whole.

In the autumn, Mr. Bikelas left for Athens, preceded by a quantity of personal letters accompanying the first numbers of the *Bulletin*. On 4th October, he wrote to me on arrival: "All the way from Brindisi, my compatriots have spoken to me with enthusiasm and delight about the Olympic Games." This sentiment was echoed by the correspondent of "*Le Temps*" in Greece. The following day, a second letter. Mr. Bikelas had seen the Prime Minister, Mr. Tricoupis, and found him "well disposed", in spite of the fact that he would have been happier if the whole affair had never arisen. Bikelas proposed convening a meeting of the Commission of the Zappeion, which has under its jurisdiction not only the monument of the same name but also the ruins of the Stadium close by.

Meanwhile, I was amassing documents with a view to the early drawing up of a detailed programme. On 26th July, Mr. G. Strehly, a teacher at the Lycée Montaigne in Paris, and a famous gymnast, had sent me his suggestions concerning individual "gymnic" sports (the only ones worth considering). This expression "gymnic" sports referred to the horizontal bar and all other apparatus. It is the right word. Today, thirty-five years later, I am still doing everything in my power to have it accepted. Then Herbert in London sent the distances to be adopted for the foot-races.

Next came the proposals of the Executive Committee of the UVF for cycling: these were simply a 2 kilometre sprint, without pace-makers, and a 100 kilometre race with pace-makers. Less reasonably, the National Cyclist's Union of Great Britain asked, in addition to a mile, a 10 km and a 100 km race, for "a time race, say twelve hours". Finally the Société d'Encouragement de l'Écime (Club for the Encouragement of Fencing) had drafted, at my request, a project comprising contests for amateurs and teachers (foils only, with heats by pools).

With these documents stuffed into my trunk, I took the express to Marseilles and embarked on the *Ortégal* bound for Piraeus, both anxious and joyful—but more



Athens: Site of the Olympic stadium, as photographed in 1894.

joyful than anxious—as I had always been on the eve of battle. While I was at sea, I crossed the long, ominous letter in which Mr. Etienne Dragoumis, a Member of Parliament and President of the Zappeion Commission, explained to me, after the departure of Bikelas who had had to leave Athens, the discouraging conclusions to which he and his colleagues had come. In fact, he was very politely suggesting I should not come and inviting me to give up my Olympic project.

Our arrival at Piraeus in the dark, the sacred vigil on the deck in the majestic silence of the night, the landing at dawn, welcomed by a number of youthful enthusiasts, who immediately became good friends, the pilgrimage to the Stadium, almost unrecognisable as such: a huge mound stripped of its marble, in the background a few ruins and the famous passageway through which the athletes used to enter the stadium... Unforgettable, enchanting hours. Scarcely had I moved into my room at the hotel than I received the visit of the French chargé d'affaires, Mr. Maurouard, and while he was there, that of the head of the government, Mr. Tricoupis, who, putting aside all protocol, seemed in a hurry to establish contact and perhaps gauge my powers of resistance to his pressure, for as I learned afterwards he was determined to do everything possible to put a stop to the idea. He pretended to object purely from the financial point of view, although in my opinion this was not his only reason.

It was a fact that Greece at the time was in rather a difficult situation. The Prime Minister was afraid that the powers to which Greece was indebted might object to “lavish expenditure” by Greece when only the strictest economy would enable her to honour her outstanding debts. I objected that the expenditure involved was comparatively small. “Look around you, examine the matter” said Mr. Tricoupis as he left. “I am sure that you will come to see that Greece does not have sufficient funds to accept the mission you wish to entrust to her.”

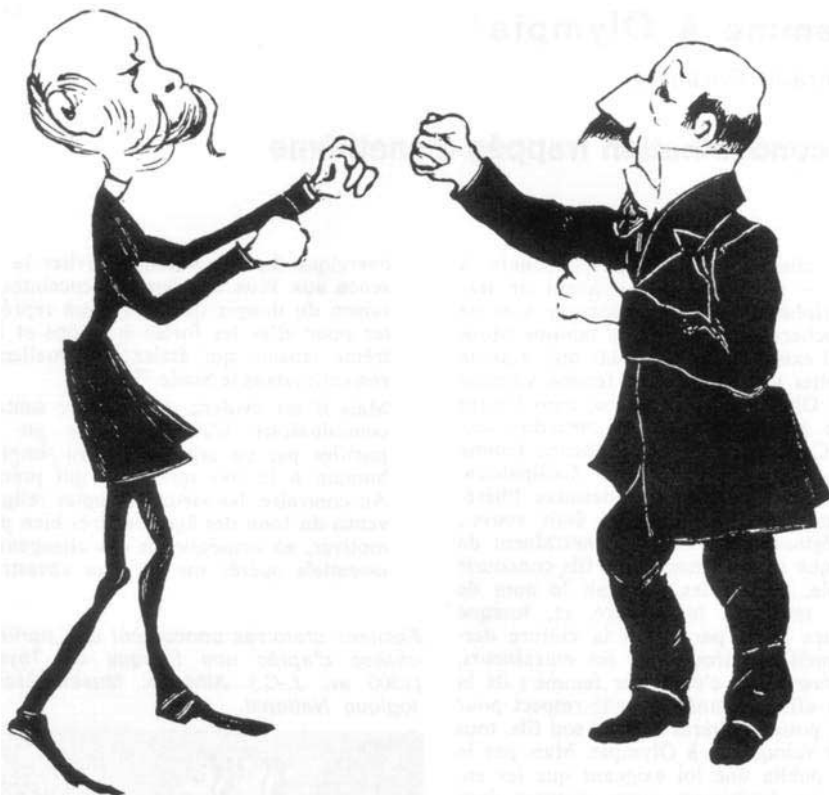
It was not until several days had passed that I found time to walk up to the Acropolis, or to see anything of Athens. I had become a sort of ball thrown back and forth between two political teams. The opposition, led by Mr. Th. Delyannis, had opted enthusiastically for the idea of the Olympic Games. The press was divided into two camps and introduced a violent note into the dispute. I spent my days visiting politicians and journalists, under the guidance of my new friends, Georges Melas, son of the Mayor of Athens, and Alexander Mercati, son of the Director of the Bank and a childhood friend of the Crown Prince.

The coachman driving the landau got down from his seat and said to Georges Melas with the charming familiarity of those days: "Young Master George, I am going to tell you what your friend must do to persuade Mr. Tricoupis." I was annoyed that the Greek I had learned at school was of no use to me, especially as a result of the pronunciation we had been taught. But, on the other hand, everyone spoke French. I was particularly surprised to find a Greece that was so alive, that had remained so true to herself, at the same time both very old and very modern. Henceforth I had confidence in her future. I would continue to have great faith in the renewed destiny awaiting her.

However I was unable to meet the one person I needed, the kingpin of the whole affair. During his stay, Bikelas had used all his charm and enthusiasm, but he had left me the task of erecting the scaffolding... As the King was in Russia, the Crown Prince was acting as regent and this made him a little more timid in his dealings with a hostile cabinet. However, in the course of two long conversations with him, I had acquired the firm conviction that he was definitely on our side. After enquiring into the sports resources of Athens, the grounds, and the manpower available, I drafted a project for a budget, which although modest seemed sufficient to me. From memory, no longer having the figures before me, I believe it must have been somewhere in the neighbourhood of 250,000 Drachmas. In the Stadium, of course, provision had been made only for wooden tiers.

I then called on Mr. Tricoupis again to tell him of my favourable impression. He had been prepared for this. He raised no objections but refused any participation on the part of the government. I asked him if I could count on a "benevolent neutrality". He promised me I could... but not without mental reservations, I imagine. I then requested the use of a hall in the Zappeion, which they could hardly refuse.

With my friends, whose numbers were swelling, I drew up letters of invitation to a meeting, which was held on 12th November and was attended by a large audience. Fortunately, I was already used to this sort of vague gathering which has to be flattered, lulled to sleep, and shaken up in turn. A Committee was set up, under the patronage of the Crown Prince—his prior acceptance to act as patron had effectively silenced any opposition to the principle. Colonel Mano, Mr. E. Scouloudis, a Member of Parliament and former Minister, Commander Soutzo, in command of a cavalry squadron, and Mr. Retzinas, Mayor of Piraeus, were elected Vice-Presidents; Mr. Paul Skousés, Treasurer; Mr. A. Mercati and Mr. G. Melas, Secretaries. The date of the Games was fixed from 5th to 15th April 1896. That year, we would be lucky enough to see the dates of Easter of both the Greek and western church coincide. The programme I had brought with me from Paris was adopted.



For or against the Olympic Games in Athens: confrontation between Ministers Delyannis and Tricoupis.

Four days later, on 16th November, I gave a lecture to the great literary society of Athens, the Parnassus. The hall was crowded. If Mr. Tricoupis' party would not yield neither would the opposition. I still have, in a number of *Romos*, the witty satirical journal written in verse, an amusing caricature showing Mr. Tricoupis and Mr. Delyannis, their hands lost in big boxing gloves, fighting over the Olympic Games. It was not without a certain anxiety that after a month's stay I had to leave Athens, by land this time. The Panachaic Gymnastics Club gave me a rousing welcome at Patras. One of its committee members had been appointed to accompany me to Olympia. It was late in the evening when we arrived there. I had to wait till dawn to see for the first time the sacred landscape, which I had so often seen in my dreams. I spent the whole morning wandering round the ruins. I was not to see Olympia again for thirty-one years, on the occasion of the official commemoration of the revival of the Games. From Patras, after a brief halt at Corfu, I reached Brindisi and then Naples where, welcomed by my new colleague the Duke of Andria, I gave a lecture on 7th December at the Philological Circle, presided over by a famous Member of Parliament, Mr. Borghi—a lecture which left me with the impression of having completely wasted my breath. Far from the strains of the Hymn to Apollo and the reassuring silhouette of the Parthenon, any evocation of the Olympic Games naturally lacked conviction.

(to be continued)